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SLIDELL AND BUCHANAN ¹

ONE of the most significant friendships in American history grew out of the official relations between John Slidell, the commissioner to Mexico on the eve of the Mexican War, and James Buchanan, the secretary of state to whom his reports were made. The mission itself was a failure. But the conviction on Slidell's part that he had earned the approval and friendship of Buchanan did much from that time to influence the careers of both. For from the summer of 1846 Slidell seems to have regarded Buchanan as presidential timber, and in advising Buchanan to refuse the ermine of the Supreme Bench, he hints at greater things to come, striking for the first time a note of leadership and guidance, almost of dominance, and constituting himself a political manager for Buchanan. His own less exalted ambition receives a more open statement. "Were I so disposed, I think that I might play the Senator for a few weeks to fill Barrow's vacancy, but the position would be a false one and would not advance my prospects for the only object of my ambition, a seat in that body of a more permanent tenure." The question arises whether to accept a practically certain election to the Lower House or to play for the more alluring but more problematical opening in the Senate. On this point, Buchanan's own advice is solicited.²

Buchanan apparently dwelt on the hostility felt toward Slidell by certain senators. For the latter replied in dismay at the thought of there being several such. Upon reflection, he could think of "that miserable imbecile Henry Johnson" and Thomas Hart Benton as his only imaginable enemies, the latter because of some remarks made at the time when Slidell withdrew his support from Van Buren. He entreated Buchanan to name these enemies,³ and then went on to assure him that neither he nor his friends would feel resentment if the appointment to Mexico should be given to another.

Reminiscent of Mexico, Slidell passed on a choice morsel concerning Calhoun, to the effect that the great Nullifier, who had denounced the Slidell mission when it was first projected as "ill-advised and premature", was himself so eager to undertake the mission that he delegated a friend to make overtures for it to Polk, only to learn that Slidell had been previously appointed.

¹ With one exception the letters upon which this article is based are among the Buchanan Papers in the Library of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

² New Orleans, Jan. 6, 1847.

³ New Orleans, Jan. 29, 1847.

The letter containing this Calhoun anecdote further expresses a hope that Buchanan himself will hold the next mission to Mexico, mentions General Cass respectfully, and intimates that if Pennsylvania could only be brought to relinquish her tariff heresies, Buchanan would be the logical choice of the party in 1848.⁴

In November, Slidell is even more specific. He declares that Louisiana Democrats favor a Northern man who opposes the Wilmot Proviso, and that "a vast majority of our leading politicians look to you as the man of their choice". If Buchanan is to be available in the fullest sense, however, opposition in Pennsylvania must be overcome, and the friendship of Robert J. Walker must be conciliated, the more so as Walker is by no means friendly to the aspirations of Dallas.⁵

But 1848 was not to realize the hope of either manager or candidate. It was for Slidell a troubled year, as his grip on Louisiana itself seemed to be weakening. He failed by a rather narrow margin of obtaining the coveted seat in the Senate, his refusal to support Taylor being assigned as the cause. He felt, nevertheless, that even at the cost of defeat the effort to avert a Democratic fusion with Whigs was well worth while. He and his friends voted for Soulé, for Slidell was not the man to split his party, whatever might be his eventual attitude toward splitting the Union. But henceforth he was the determined and implacable foe of Soulé for control in Louisiana.

Baltimore was no more encouraging than Baton Rouge, for the Louisiana vote was divided between Buchanan and Cass, and Slidell, though invited to do so, refused to cast the ballot for the state. He sorrowfully wrote Buchanan, "I need not tell you how much I feel this, but must bear it with the best grace I may".⁶

The Buchanan papers contain no further communication from Slidell for over a year, though there seems no reason to suppose that the correspondence lapsed for any such length of time. It reopens with a social rather than political letter from Tarrytown on the Hudson, mentioning that Slidell and his family are guests of the former's brother-in-law, Commodore Matthew C. Perry, previous to their departure for Saratoga, and urging Buchanan to pay a promised visit to New Orleans in the coming winter.⁷

One of the qualities which distinguished Slidell as a shrewd and able politician was his keen perception that under the increasing strain

⁴ New Orleans, Mar. 21, 1847.

⁵ New Orleans, Nov. 13, 1847.

⁶ Baltimore, May 22, 1848.

⁷ Tarrytown, N. Y., June 23, 1849.

between the North and the South that candidate stood the best chance of victory who, beyond making it plain that he was "safe", least committed himself on debatable subjects. For that reason Slidell's attempt to dissuade Buchanan from all thought of the governorship in Pennsylvania deserves quotation at length. It is a searching criticism of American politics at the period, and a revelation of the clear mind of the writer.

I think there are many reasons why for the present you should not voluntarily place yourself in a position where you will be called upon to express your opinions on the subject of slavery in the territories. They are sufficiently well known in the South to make your name acceptable there, and if you abstain from any active participation in the question now, the Free Soilers, who, I am sorry to see, comprise the immense majority of the non-slaveholding states, will when the matter is disposed of entertain no hostility towards anyone, who has not come immediately into conflict with them in the final struggle. You see I have not lost my hopes of yet seeing you in the White House. There is not a man of our party whose chances are as good as yours and I cannot believe that the Whig party will hold together after the first session of Congress.⁸

Slidell's attitude toward Calhoun has already been indicated. Toward Clay, Whig though he was, he felt a kindlier sentiment, and in August, 1849, he confided to Buchanan that, popular impressions to the contrary notwithstanding, Clay no longer held any presidential aspirations, but that if opportunity arose he would come out against Taylor, whom he unquestionably had in mind in his "constantly speaking of the incompatibility of statesmanship and soldiership".⁹ In Slidell's opinion, the day of Webster, Clay, and Calhoun was nearing its end. The future belonged not with the "Elder Statesmen" but with rising stars who could see the manifest destiny of slavery and the necessity of its fulfilment. Thus, almost three years before such a prediction could be put to the test, Slidell informs Buchanan that "The next democratic candidate cannot be Cass neither can he be a free soiler. I do not find with either section any objection to you and I now consider it as certain as any event can be that you are to be our standard bearer."¹⁰ The opportunity to promote the interests of Buchanan is welcomed by Slidell as a selfish gain for himself. By so doing, he may be able to slough off an apathy felt for two years past, and through the excitements of the contest return to "a tone of mind which I thought I had lost forever".¹¹

To elect Buchanan would mean to render doubly certain the attain-

⁸ Saratoga Springs, July 25, 1849.

⁹ Saratoga Springs, Aug. 11, 1849.

¹⁰ New York, Oct. 14, 1849.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

ment of Cuba. Late in 1849, Slidell accordingly visited the island in order to gain impressions at first hand. To this he made at the time, however, only a passing allusion, the immediate occasion of a letter being Buchanan's forthcoming visit to New Orleans. And with the most cautious forethought, he raises the question whether Buchanan will desire a public reception: "you must decide how far it will be advisable to accept or decline any public invitations which might perhaps render it embarrassing to avoid touching upon slave[ry]." ¹²

The slavery question was pushing on to its temporary solution in the Compromise of 1850. In view of his present influence in Louisiana and growing weight in national affairs, the attitude of Slidell toward the crisis has a distinct importance. In February, 1850, he informs Buchanan that when they meet he will have much to say on the subject of Cuba. For the present, however, and "until the present excitement respecting slavery shall have subsided"—he has no hope that it will ever be entirely abated—Cuba had better remain in the background. He then turns to a denunciation of third parties and their dupes, Taylor Democrats in particular, and, while hoping to reclaim the misguided followers, contends that their leaders should be inexorably read out of the party. "They will be much more harmless acting openly with our adversaries than in pretended affiliation with the democracy." ¹³ He requests of Buchanan information as to political currents at Washington, and declares his own hostility to a Southern convention. An attack on slavery in the District of Columbia would warrant a firm stand, but:

I have not considered the passage of the Wilmot Proviso as sufficient provocation for the extreme and disastrous remedy of separation and it has never been my habit to make declarations which I have not fully intended to carry out to the letter. Pray let me have your advice on the subject. Perhaps the time has already arrived when it becomes necessary for Southern men to pass the true line of resistance to secure themselves from further aggression. ¹⁴

In the afterlight of history, an inquiry from Slidell to Buchanan as to the timeliness of secession in 1850 has a peculiar interest. Buchanan apparently confirmed Slidell's own views that the *ultima ratio* was uncalled for, and the death of Taylor further encouraged Slidell to hope that "the chances of the settlement of our sectional differences will be improved by Filmore's accession". ¹⁵ Accordingly in the autumn Slidell continued his labors in Buchanan's behalf.

¹² Havana, Dec. 7, 1849.

¹³ New Orleans, Feb. 5, 1850.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Saratoga Springs, July 13, 1850.

After visiting Buchanan at Lancaster, Slidell urges him to spend some time in New York, where he is frequently mentioned as a more available candidate than General Cass.¹⁶ He emphasizes the importance of establishing a New York paper pledged to the Buchanan candidacy, for "taking it for granted that you are sure of Pennsylvania, with New York every thing is safe" — this notwithstanding the party dissension in Louisiana created by Mr. Soulé and likely to drive that state into the hands of the Whigs.¹⁷

With 1851, the national campaign was assuming more definite outlines, and Slidell adopted a distinctly managerial tone. He assures Buchanan of almost unanimous support from the South, but emphasizes the New York vote as pivotal. He entreats him to overcome the "dread of locomotion" and visit Saratoga, the rendezvous of politicians. An understanding with Marcy is of prime importance. The electoral vote of New York will probably go to the Whigs, but they must be kept so busy at home that their power for mischief elsewhere will be shorn. Louisiana is now safe; so, too, the rest of the Southwest. "You are the only man who can unite the conflicting divisions of the Southern democracy. The Whigs will, I think, carry the State elections this year, but we will be all right in November '52." The communication closes with a renewed entreaty to Buchanan to be up and stirring. With a guile not easy to resist, he reminds Buchanan that "Some men under similar circumstances would do better to remain at home, but you (you will not suspect *me* of flattering) can only gain by being seen and known".¹⁸

Illness in his family almost prevented Slidell's trip North in the summer of 1851, but he did come to Saratoga, and from there outlined the state of politics as he estimated it. New York, he felt, would cast a Whig ballot, "but thank God we can do without it".¹⁹ Marcy could be counted as a friend, though the precise extent of assistance to be expected from him might be subject to doubt. Robert J. Walker professed the friendliest sentiments, "and yet in spite of myself and with a feeling that I am doing him injustice, I cannot divest myself of a certain degree of distrust". Walker's help is really as important as Marcy's, and Slidell strongly recommends that Buchanan exchange views with him. "I consider his advocacy of your nomination all important." Buchanan, it seems, had felt that any attempt by himself as an outsider to influence New York politics

¹⁶ New York, Oct. 9, 1850.

¹⁷ New Orleans, Dec. 16, 1850.

¹⁸ New Orleans, May 9, 1851.

¹⁹ Saratoga Springs, Aug. 8, 1851.

might do more harm than good. To Slidell, however, this hands-off policy seemed just about to have outlived its usefulness. New York being the keystone of the situation, he almost wishes himself once more a New Yorker, not that he is so vain as to think his influence so far-reaching, "but as things are and possibly will be for several months, a strong will with some tact and discretion could effect a great deal". In this wholly justified and even modest statement, Slidell has left us one of the few self-estimates which we have. His was, indeed, a strong will. And if the clearness of his vision and the definiteness of his aims and goals create the impression of a personality controlled more by head than by heart, it can not be denied that he possessed both tact and discretion.²⁰

The project of establishing a Buchanan newspaper in New York took shape more definitely on Slidell's arrival in the city. He inquires if Buchanan will approve General Cushing as editor, admits that his integrity is dubious, but asserts that his talents are beyond dispute and that self-interest will hold him in line. As to financing the paper, Slidell's nephew, August Belmont, is warmly interested, and "he has already received assurances from a number of the wealthiest merchants of coöperation".²¹ Thus "international bankers" and the money power were early espousing the candidacy of the conservative Buchanan. But Slidell draws a sharp distinction between the wealth which he is able to control, and the predatory wealth enlisted in the Douglas interest. "It is confined to one clique not very numerous, but active and unscrupulous, the Ocean mail contractors", at whose head stood the sinister figure of George Law.²²

Slidell concluded this summary of the situation in New York by hoping that Buchanan had on no account failed to write to Marcy.²³ Buchanan for once did arouse himself to the "dreaded locomotion" and interviewed Marcy in person. Slidell, who had meanwhile returned to New Orleans, first learned of this through the newspapers, and wrote Buchanan in some alarm at his failure to learn the details of the interview from their friend Belmont. It was greatly to be feared that Marcy might decide to enter the race himself. As for Louisiana, the Whigs, as anticipated, were in control of the legislature, but all would be well when it came to the choosing of delegates for the Baltimore Convention.²⁴

²⁰ Saratoga Springs, Aug. 8, 1851.

²¹ New York, Sept. 29, 1851.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ New Orleans, Nov. 17, 1851.

But the highwater mark of hope for the 1852 nomination had been already reached. New York was pivotal and New York depended upon Marcy. Marcy, it seemed more and more clear, would be his own candidate, and Slidell indulged in one of the few complaints he ever addressed to Buchanan:

I fear that the favorable moment for action in New York has been irretrievably lost. Marcy was in such a mood last summer that if you had met you would in all probability have secured his active co-operation. He *may* yet have it in his power by a strong effort to turn the scale in your favor. But the chances are that he will not be convinced of the impossibility of his own nomination until too late. If you have, however, a strong willed and unanimous delegation from Pennsylvania, you can do without New York.²⁵

Among the rivals for the honors, Slidell made much the same distinction between Cass and Douglas that Sumner later drew between them.²⁶ He found an unexpected strength lined up for Cass, and drawn from "sound, reliable men who have only at heart the triumph of their principles", whereas the advocates of Douglas were for the most part "trading politicians and adventurers, with a very slight sprinkling of well meaning men who think it for the interest of the party to cast off old leaders and select a chief from the young democracy". To Slidell it was no recommendation for Douglas that Soulé should have enlisted under his banner.²⁷ The purchase by Douglas partizans of the New Orleans *Delta* and four country papers in Louisiana alone indicated to Slidell a strong campaign chest in the North. "If such men as have originated the Douglas movement could succeed in imposing him upon us as the nominee of the great democratic party, I should despair of the republic and although I shall be *cautious* in expressing such an opinion, no consideration could induce me to support him." Toward Cass, on the contrary, in spite of serious doubts whether he could be elected, Slidell would extend an "honest support". He would do as much for Butler, Marcy, or others, "but I still entertain the hope, which indeed all my letters from Washington warrant, that you will obtain the nomination, when I can go into the camp *con amore*". In Virginia, Douglas seemed to be the only serious competitor; and in Georgia, by Cobb's account, Buchanan was the strongest candidate, though Cobb's own good-will was subject to doubt.²⁸

The next mention of Douglas is more friendly, because of a grow-

²⁵ New Orleans, Dec. 27, 1851.

²⁶ A. C. McLaughlin, *Lewis Cass*, pp. 319-320.

²⁷ New Orleans, Feb. 26, 1852.

²⁸ New Orleans, Mar. 19, 1852.

ing conviction on Slidell's part that his following in Louisiana was less menacing than had been at first supposed, the Douglas men preferring Buchanan to Cass, and being likely after the first ballot to vote accordingly unless overruled by Douglas himself. Meanwhile Buchanan occupied a similar position with the followers of Cass, who were grateful for his moral support against Douglas. But predictions were idle until it should be known who were to be the delegates at Baltimore. If Buchanan approved, Slidell would himself go to Baltimore, as Belmont wished it decidedly, and he really might be able to bring some final pressure on the wavering Marcy.²⁹

He reminds Buchanan that the Whigs are attacking his slavery record by accusing him of opposing, previous to the Compromise of 1820, the admission of Missouri as a slave state. Slidell considers this a venial sin, even if committed, and one long since atoned for by Buchanan's priority over all other Northern men, Democrats or Whigs, in the defense of Southern rights. But he is under an impression that somewhere he has seen the Missouri story denied, and if the facts warrant it, he thinks it would be advisable for Buchanan to refute it officially. He repeats his alarm for Louisiana if Fillmore should be the Whig nominee.³⁰

A month later and the high hopes built on years of planning were dashed. Their obituary may be quoted in full, for the intimate picture it gives of the aims, motives, and scruples of Slidell as a politician.³¹

NEW ORLEANS, 23 June, 1852.

My dear Mr. Buchanan,

I will not attempt to express to you all the annoyances and mortification I have felt at your not having obtained the nomination at Baltimore. It is the only political question in which for several years I have felt any warm interest. My faith in our political principles has never for a moment been shaken, but various reasons had combined to make any active interposition in party struggles irksome and distasteful to me. I believe that had it not been for the hope that I might in some feeble degree contribute to your nomination my retirement from the political arena would have been permanent and complete. I should have confined myself to depositing an unmixed democratic vote at every important election. If Cass had been nominated he could have had my vote and pecuniary contribution, with little anxiety and still less hope for his success. As to Douglas, Houston, Lane, or any man of that stamp, as I should have considered success with such men as more disastrous to the permanent interests of the party than their defeat, I should not have voted at all. At one time, I could have cordially supported Marcy, as my second choice,

²⁹ New Orleans, Apr. 15, 1852.

³⁰ New Orleans, May 22, 1852.

³¹ New Orleans, June 23, 1852.

but his weakness in yielding to the spurious and artificial excitement gotten up in favor of Kossuth and intervention shook my faith entirely in his judgement, but his political integrity and the course of his friends at Baltimore, who by well timed interposition could have secured your nomination, has entirely changed my feelings towards him. As it is, I am as well satisfied with the choice of the convention as I could possibly be with any result short of your nomination and I shall heartily support Pierce and King without feeling any particular enthusiasm. I shall do everything in my power to aid in carrying the vote of Louisiana which I think we have more than equal chance of doing. With Filmore opposed to us, I should have hoped for success, without counting on it very confidently.

Mrs. Slidell has written you a note which I enclose. I trust that we shall meet at Saratoga or some where this summer. We leave here for New York by the river about 3 or 4 July. Our journey will probably not be longer than 10 days. Pray let us hear from you care of Belmont, who, I believe, is almost as much annoyed at your defeat as any of us.

Believe me ever faithfully and respy

Your friend etc.

JOHN SLIDELL.

Honl. James Buchanan,
Wheatland.

Events were to demonstrate that the optimistic calculations thus temporarily set back were based on a sound analysis of political trends, and with an energy no whit abated, Slidell laid his plans for the next convention and the next election. His correspondence for the next year or two reveals the same keen and incisive estimate of men and events, and as the Cincinnati Convention drew near, it becomes a definite source for the history of the times.

The summer following his disappointment at Baltimore, Slidell spent at Saratoga, carefully avoiding Newport with its temperance legislation because of his "horror of despotism in every shape" and reluctance, in spite of his belief that the law was a dead letter, to place himself "within the jurisdiction of a state where so tyrannical a system exists".³² Contact with Northern politics confirmed his impression that the Whig party was moribund. "It may be galvanised for the moment into a show of activity, but after a few short convulsive struggles it will be definitely numbered among the things that were." But with a blindness to the implications of his own prophecy, rare in this astute observer, he declares that "It will of course be revived under some other organization and probably with a new name, when we shall I hope slough off some of our own rottenness to be absorbed by the force of natural affinities into the Seward and Hale faction".³³

³² Saratoga Springs, July 28, 1852.

³³ New York, Sept. 15, 1852.

While in New York, Slidell learned that many Democrats, including General Cass, considered him as strong timber for Pierce's cabinet. He expressed as much surprise as pleasure at this, and attributed it to anxiety "to prevent the secessionists with Soulé at their head from acquiring supremacy", and to a conviction that Slidell was the most available Union man in the states south of Virginia.³⁴

If this Cabinet appointment did awaken any hopes and subsequent disappointments, these were nothing to the surprise which Slidell felt at Pierce's failure to offer the State Department to Buchanan. While the Cabinet decisions were pending, Buchanan apparently suggested the advisability of Slidell's going to Washington. To this he demurred, on the ground that a Cabinet post, now very unlikely to be offered, would be undesirable if it meant close social and political relations with such men as Hunter and Nicholson, who, it was understood, would be members, and on whom Slidell placed a very low estimate. "If the rest of the cabinet be proportionately weak, I should have little hope of its duration or of its being long enabled to command majorities in Congress." Under such circumstances, a foreign mission would be more desirable than a Cabinet appointment. But if men like Buchanan were being ignored in the framing of the new government, there was scant likelihood that those in control of events would view Slidell's pretensions with favor. On the whole, Slidell's chief causes for satisfaction lay close at home, where his wing of the Democracy was strongly in the ascendant over Soulé.³⁵

Discussion of Cabinet possibilities continued until the results were finally known. But by January 21, 1853, Slidell had pretty well made up his mind not to accept what would probably not be offered, on the basis that "If the Department of State is to be offered to and refused by men of Mr. Hunter's calibre and questionable political orthodoxy, I do not feel very ambitious for a post in the cabinet";³⁶ and in February he professed the utmost chagrin that Buchanan should have exposed himself to discourtesy and rebuff on his behalf. "But I look upon this incident in a still more serious light. It is to my mind a very pregnant indication that sudden and unexpected elevation to so dizzy a height has had its usual bewildering effect."³⁷

It was in truth no more than natural that Pierce should hold at arm's length his most formidable rival and that rival's lieutenant, but to ignore them entirely was not feasible, and even as Buchanan was

³⁴ New York, Sept. 27, 1852.

³⁵ New Orleans, Dec. 31, 1852.

³⁶ New Orleans, Jan. 21, 1853.

³⁷ New Orleans, Feb. 13, 1853.

eventually offered the mission to the Court of St. James, so Slidell was nominated for that to Central America, a compliment which he professed to appreciate, but which he did not accept, preferring an economic mission to London for the sale of railroad bonds to a diplomatic mission in Central America.³⁸ On the eve of sailing, Slidell drafted a short letter to Buchanan which reveals a rather curious insensibility to the proper relations between public and private business. Buchanan could not be in London at the same time with Slidell, who laments: "I had anticipated great satisfaction from meeting you in London not altogether unmixed with a selfish feeling that your presence might aid Mr. Robb and me in conducting our negotiation for the sale of Rail Road bonds."³⁹

A hard-won victory over Soulé assured the realization of the aim long ago announced by Slidell as his goal, and when he returned from Europe, it was to take the coveted place in the United States Senate. No better vantage-point could have been selected for securing information, and Slidell's letters from this time gain in interest from the authority with which they were penned.

The happiness felt by Slidell at this fruition of his hopes found expression in a number of witticisms, rare for him, at Buchanan's adventures in going to Buckingham Palace in the costume of a plain American citizen. Secretary Marcy's attempt to advertise American simplicity complicated the situation of American diplomatic agents. Slidell took the occasion to congratulate Buchanan on his single blessedness.

To what unheard of contumelies and injuries might you not have been exposed had the additional responsibility of Mrs. Buchanan's costume been thrown upon you, and then although we Louisianians may fight strangers with impunity what would have become of you from the Quaker State if you had attempted to avenge in the blood of the critic any commentary upon the taste in dress of your better half.⁴⁰

Turning to more serious aspects of the political scene, Slidell finds much dissatisfaction at the course pursued by the Administration toward the rival factions, Hunkers and Barnburners, in New York. An intervention regrettable under any circumstances was particularly inept when directed on behalf of the wrong side, and betrayed a gross ignorance of the state of public opinion. More serious even than this was Pierce's failure to win dignity and strength for his administration through the selection of a strong cabinet. "This

³⁸ New Orleans, Mar. 30 and May 27, 1853.

³⁹ New York, June 28, 1853.

⁴⁰ Washington, Jan. 14, 1854.

is a much more important element of success than is generally supposed and Pierce will yet in all probability feel the want of it." In fact, lacking the personal support of the leaders of his party, Pierce could count upon merely a formal allegiance to a titular head, for "there is probably not a member of the Senate, who does not consider his own individual opinion in every other respect entitled to quite as much consideration as that of the President. In other words he is the 'de jure' not the 'de facto' head of the party". On top of it all, Pierce is a weak man ruled by two members of his Cabinet, or rather one, now, for Slidell thinks that Jefferson Davis has fallen into some disfavor because of his announced desire to abandon the President and return to the Senate. With such a heavy budget on his part, Slidell begs in return that Buchanan will inform him how the diplomatic corps at London regards Soulé and his duels.⁴¹

In view of the political intimacy which this correspondence reveals, it would be surprising if Slidell had taken no part in the movement leading to the Ostend Manifesto. His interest in Cuba has already been noted, and soon after Buchanan entered upon his duties at London the Cuban situation entered upon a phase peculiarly alarming to Southerners and annexationists. Slidell, with many others, was convinced that Great Britain and France were in a plot to "Africanize" Cuba, even converting it into a black republic rather than see it fall into American hands; this, of course, presupposing Spain's own inability to retain possession. He suggests that Belmont, then minister at the Hague, through his powerful connections at Madrid, might be in a position to secure for Buchanan authentic information as to the existence and nature of these engagements; and when he hints that the \$15,000,000 designed for Santa Anna in Mexico may be required "in expenditures of more urgent necessity", he has in mind possible contingencies in Cuba.⁴²

Before writing again, Slidell delivered one of his few formal addresses in the Senate, taking as his text the necessity of action respecting Cuba. In transmitting to Buchanan a corrected copy of his speech, he asks, subject to "all proper reservations", for additional information on the subject, as well as for a more precise statement of what Buchanan meant in his Elgin dinner speech by saying that "if we were engaged in war we should abstain from commissioning private armed vessels unless national vessels of the enemy were inhibited from capturing our merchant vessels".⁴³

⁴¹ Washington, Jan. 14, 1854.

⁴² Washington, Mar. 25, 1854.

⁴³ Washington, May 4, 1854.

So long as Cuba remained the focus of diplomatic interest, Slidell kept in close touch with the State Department, urging upon Marcy the need of frequent reports from and to the ministers at London and Paris. When Marcy admitted the wisdom of such a course, Slidell remarked that this change of policy might be due to the secretary's own reflections, or again that it might have been suggested by the President, "on whom I have more than once urged the absolute necessity of bringing your [Buchanan's] influence and that of Mason and Belmont to bear upon our negotiations at Madrid. Things may yet take such a turn as to render the Russian legation at Madrid a very useful auxiliary".⁴⁴

Eager as Slidell was to advance the cause, he felt no inclination to be a catspaw for the Pierce administration. He participated with Mason, Douglas, Davis, and two others in a White House conference held early in June at which he urged upon Pierce a message to Congress so worded "as to satisfy our people in New Orleans that he was prepared to pursue an energetic policy and thus induce them to abstain from any hostile expedition". When Pierce attempted to evade personal responsibility for such a course by suggesting that Slidell himself telegraph the district attorney at New Orleans that "immediate and decisive measures would be taken in relation to Cuba", he peremptorily refused, on the very proper ground that such a notice must be on all accounts an official act of the State Department. Marcy was accordingly instructed. But a recess afforded excuse for delay, and Slidell was increasingly convinced that the President would never take the promised action, the more so as his habitual vacillation was a subject of general comment in both houses of Congress.⁴⁵

However shifting or shifty the administration, Slidell was not the man to cease pressing a point so near to his heart. A passage in his next letter to Buchanan strongly suggests that he was a moving force behind the Manifesto. "The idea now is to have you, Soulé, and Mason to meet for the purpose of consultation. I have suggested that on account of the Rothschild influence at Madrid and Paris it would be well that Belmont be brought either personally or by correspondence into your counsels." Such activity on the part of a senator who was scarcely of the President's immediate household of faith may well have seemed officious, and relations between Slidell and Marcy became somewhat tense.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Washington, June 17, 1854.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Aug. 6, 1854.

Familiarity with the Pierce administration bred no respect in the mind of Slidell. He unburdened himself to Buchanan in numerous complaints at the government's failure to command the respect of its own partisans. For the failure of negotiations for Cuba and the futility of the Ostend Manifesto, he blamed neither Spain nor Buchanan but Pierce. He asks for "such details about your conference with Mason and Soulé as you may choose to communicate confidentially, although I have not now the least hope of acquiring Cuba under this administration".⁴⁷ This being the case, all that remained was to plan so carefully for the next administration that the Baltimore disappointment should not be repeated. He warned Buchanan, who had grown weary of his mission, not to resign prematurely and by a return to America surrender the advantage of silence on critical issues. "The political atmosphere is malarious (if there be no such word there should be) and those who are not compelled to inhale it had better keep away."⁴⁸ Credit is due to the sagacity which could thus condense all the essentials for success.

Meanwhile Slidell looked to his own fences, returning to the Senate with little difficulty,⁴⁹ where he remained loyal to Buchanan,⁵⁰ to whom he directed in June, 1855, a most entertaining survey of events. To begin with, he was "for the present at least and possibly forever" at outs with Pierce and Marcy. Pierce would probably be quite willing to accept Buchanan's resignation; Marcy might like the post; but to take it would seem like retiring under fire. Soulé, back from a ridiculous failure in Spain, was out for Marcy's scalp, and the secretary must stand his ground. Rumor had it that Soulé meant to challenge Marcy. "Will not this be a capital farce? I look forward to the denouement as a rich treat." Marcy was probably leading him on and at the proper moment would pounce on him "à la Scott", for, given time and preparation, Marcy with pen in hand was a dangerous customer. Slidell has not time to explain in detail his own break with Pierce, but in substance it was due to "repeated violations of his word which can only be explained by the most reckless indifference to truth or deliberate treachery".⁵¹

In the more general field of politics, Slidell thought it surprising that the people at Newport, where he was sojourning, felt far more interest in Sebastopol and the Crimea than in Kansas and Know-nothingism. But in so far as the parties were lining up for the con-

⁴⁷ New York, Oct. 18, 1854.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Washington, Mar. 5, 1855.

⁵⁰ New Orleans, Apr. 3, 1855, quoted in Moore's *Works of Buchanan*, IX. 332.

⁵¹ Washington, June 17, 1855.

test, the Democracy could count on the more intelligent and wealthy Whigs, whom disgust at "the results of their truckling to negrophilism and the other cant of the day" was driving into "the true conservative party of the country". Even so, it may be too late to remedy the situation, and Slidell, intent upon nominating his friend to the presidency of a united country, already sounds the note of dissolution. Almost the key-note of Buchanan's term of office is Slidell's prophetic declaration that "trustful as I have hitherto been of the perpetuity of the Union I begin to look forward to a dissolution as a not very remote possibility. The question will be solved one way or the other during the next Presidential term. How different would have been our position had you received the nomination at Baltimore!"⁵²

A Democratic triumph in Pennsylvania with "every issue fairly met and the glove thrown down to all the isms combined" served notice that victory would be certain in 1856.⁵³ And Buchanan might rest assured that absence was not injuring his cause. "The old adage that 'les absents ont toujours tort' will not be verified in your case. The *people* are taking care of you and the almost universal admission by *politicians* here from every part of the country that you are the only man for the crisis, is an unmistakeable indication of the force and depth of the popular current." The time was come, however, when Buchanan must express his obedience to the will of the sovereign people. Too rigid insistence that he was not a candidate would work to his detriment; he had better convey his willingness to accept by a letter "to some *discreet* friend or friends". As for Slidell himself, nothing was to be gained by a reconciliation with Pierce. He was in good company as it was, "for the feeling of contempt for Pierce in the Senate is general. Indeed, with the exception *perhaps* of General Dodge, not a man there is in favor of his renomination". Pierce's own expectation of a second term was, therefore, utterly absurd. "But I am writing treason and my letter is to go through the State Department. I must not further expose my head."⁵⁴

Buchanan wrote the desired letter, and with 1856 the pre-convention campaign was under way. The support of General Cass, announced in February, was particularly welcome. Slidell attributed it in part to Cass's antipathy toward Douglas, who was believed to be an intending candidate, and whose competition would be more formidable than that of Pierce.⁵⁵ Douglas, however, might himself

⁵² Newport, R. I., Sept. 2, 1855.

⁵³ Washington, Oct. 11, 1855.

⁵⁴ Washington, Dec. 9, 1855.

⁵⁵ Washington, Feb. 7, 1856.

come into the Buchanan camp. Even without Douglas, the Northwest, save Illinois, was safe. And on closer examination, Douglas himself was seen to possess some virtues. "I thought at first", wrote Slidell, "that he would give us a great deal of trouble. But his tone is now entirely changed and with his present feeling I would prefer that he should not formally retire." The real enemy was Pierce. Slidell would watch his every move. But Buchanan need not fear. His ground was impregnable. It might be debatable at this time whether Buchanan should return. Firm friends held different views regarding this. But Slidell would still counsel absence.⁵⁶

In May, Slidell thought it advisable that Buchanan, who had meanwhile returned to America, and was at his estate of Wheatland, should take a positive stand on the Kansas-Nebraska question. "This you can do in perfect harmony with your whole record. I believe that it will reconcile Douglas and if it do not it will at least spike his guns." It would be opportune, also, if Buchanan should seize upon the forthcoming visit of the Pennsylvania state delegation announcing his nomination at Harrisburg, to deny categorically the possibility of his ever accepting a second term in the presidency; it would appear much better in that form than by letter to individuals.⁵⁷ Both of these points Slidell deemed sufficiently important to emphasize soon afterward in a second letter to the rather slow-moving Buchanan. Particularly must he indicate the vote he would have cast on the Kansas-Nebraska Bill had he been in Congress at the time.⁵⁸

A rumor that Douglas and Hunter were combining to support Pierce determined Slidell to go at once to Cincinnati to marshal his forces in person.⁵⁹ Douglas was definitely won over at the price of naming John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as the vice-presidential candidate, to whom Slidell himself wrote, "I was induced to urge your nomination on the Louisiana delegation by the earnest appeal of Richardson of Illinois [a Douglas leader] whose bearing and conduct during the convention had been most manly and straightforward. I considered your selection for the Vice Presidency as a graceful and merited compliment to the friends of Douglas."⁶⁰

Success had finally crowned the efforts of Slidell, marking, indeed, the apex of his career. Too often, as in Mexico and France, his great abilities were pitted against hopeless odds. Here in a fair field

⁵⁶ Washington, Mar. 11, 1856.

⁵⁷ Washington, May, 1856.

⁵⁸ Washington, May 24, 1856.

⁵⁹ Washington, May 26, 1856.

⁶⁰ From a letter kindly called to my attention by Mr. Roy F. Nichols of Columbia University.

they attained a most difficult objective, pursued for the past eight years with intelligence and faith.

In communicating the result to Buchanan, Slidell pointed out that the first opportunity should be utilized to pay a deserved compliment to the Old Line Whigs, many of whom, as Slidell had foreseen, were coming into the Democratic fold.⁶¹

In furthering Buchanan's prospects, Slidell left little to the chance that Buchanan himself might think of the right thing to say and do. He reminds him to thank Pierce for his endorsement. He warns him that Pierce, who at heart desires his defeat, can accomplish this only by prolonging the troubles in Kansas. He recites the sinister plan of Davis to withdraw United States troops, leaving the territory to anarchy, and concludes that if Pierce accepts this advice it will be necessary to denounce him, even at the cost of some Southern votes, for the sake of holding the North in line. If the worst comes to the worst, he hopes that Douglas can be persuaded to take the initiative in such a move. Meanwhile, has Buchanan remembered to write to Cass and Douglas? Cass has gone to Pierce to remonstrate against the proposed removal of troops. Douglas has refrained from doing so on the ground of a breach with the President, with whom he had no influence.⁶²

A few days later, Slidell is warning Buchanan to keep close watch of the Lancaster papers, any indiscretion on the part of whose editors would be attributed to him. Already Phelps of Missouri is complaining of one such editorial, very friendly to Benton. And Benton, Slidell reminds the candidate, has not the confidence of any of Buchanan's friends. For himself, he says, "I confess that I have strong prejudices against Benton which may bias my judgment and I hope but do not expect that my apprehensions of his treachery may not be realised". Another uncertain quantity is Soulé. Nothing will be gained by his support, yet his open hostility should not be courted.⁶³

Ranging the entire political horizon, Slidell could not ignore the German element in the Northwest, and he counselled Buchanan to conciliate their spokesman, Grund.⁶⁴ A far greater force than Grund, however, is Robert J. Walker, and despite a natural predilection for Buchanan, he too must be won over. For Walker is governed by his antagonisms rather than by his friendships. "Walker is ardently your friend, but he is more ardently the enemy of Benton." That

⁶¹ Washington, June 14, 1856.

⁶² Washington, June 17, 1856.

⁶³ Washington, July 4, 1856.

⁶⁴ Washington, July 17, 1856.

unlucky article in the Lancaster *Intelligencer* favoring Benton had cost Buchanan the establishment by Walker, whose resources for such a venture were more than ample, of a newspaper in New York devoted to the Buchanan interest. But even now it may not be too late. He will soon be in New York. "Now pray write him at once and invite him to visit Wheatland and when he shall have talked with you an hour everything will be right. He is proud and sensitive and should be conciliated." Slidell himself is taking care of Grund, whose objections are to Buchanan's friends, not to the candidate himself. He is gifted and a power among the Germans. But the real issue is Walker. On no account must Buchanan fail to write him.⁶⁵

Two days later, Grund is Slidell's chief theme. Buchanan has only to give the word and he will enter the lists with enthusiasm as a correspondent for the Philadelphia *Ledger* and other papers. In reaching such a decision, Buchanan must remember that the matter is near to the hearts of both Senators Bright and Douglas.⁶⁶

In the midsummer of 1856, Slidell was far from well, but his reports lose nothing in vigor from their writer's infirmities. Kentucky will be the cynosure of the doubtful states to the south. Maryland is already safe, Cass and Toombs never having seen greater enthusiasm than at Frederick. Congress will soon adjourn. The Black Republicans will not dare to defeat the appropriation bills. "If they do, the Senate will not yield an inch. For myself I should not regret to see them taking that course. We should have a foretaste of the consequences of disunion. I believe that it would produce a general panic and bankruptcy in the Northern States. We at the South have so little for the money expended among us that we should comparatively suffer but little embarrassment."⁶⁷ But even Black Republicans are evidently forgotten when "Everything looks bright and even the croakers are silent".⁶⁸

At the end of September, with the national election but a few weeks away, Slidell emphasizes the importance of carrying the state election in Pennsylvania for its sentimental effect elsewhere. "In this view we have said that every dollar contributed for Pennsylvania would economise ten in New York." He encloses a letter from Stuart of Michigan putting the case with even less reserve. "In my opinion it [Pennsylvania] is the great battle of the campaign. And if any amount of labor and money will secure it, they should be ex-

⁶⁵ Washington, July 18, 1856.

⁶⁶ Washington, July 20, 1856.

⁶⁷ Senate Chamber, Aug. 9, 1856.

⁶⁸ Washington, Aug. 12, 1856.

pended.”⁶⁹ On Pennsylvania hung the decision of Kentucky and Tennessee, whereas success in Pennsylvania would insure large majorities in the fifteen Southern states and in all the doubtful free states. With so much at stake, Slidell was none too sure of Pennsylvania prospects; “for the first time since your nomination, I have felt alarmed”.⁷⁰

This was on the fourth of October. By the seventeenth he had seen the shadows flee away. With Pennsylvania and Indiana secure, “The Union is now safe, but we must endeavor to make your majority overwhelming”. To that end, everything possible must be done to heal the party dissensions in New York. Slidell will go there in person. Has Buchanan any instructions?⁷¹ Once arrived, he found that prospects exceeded anticipations. In only one congressional district was friction still serious, and with the tide so favorable, victory was beyond doubt, “but I shall be only half satisfied if your triumph be not overwhelming”. In a postscript, courteously, as an afterthought, is the added cheer that “The financial question has been attended to”.⁷² It only remains to congratulate the victor, and this Slidell does in a note both of encouragement and of warning.

You are not to lie in a bed of roses for the next four years, but I feel the most entire confidence that you will be able to build up and consolidate a sound homogeneous national democracy that can defy the attacks of fanatics north and south. I have almost as little sympathy with the Rhett school of politicians as with the Know Nothing ruffians of Baltimore and New Orleans.⁷³

Success in the campaign raised new problems, upon which Slidell expressed decided opinions. In foreign relations, he opposed “any extension to the novel and false principle introduced into our foreign policy by the Clayton and Bulwer treaty and I could only be induced with extreme reluctance to give my vote for its ratification by the desire to relieve your administration from embarrassment”.⁷⁴ In domestic concerns, he asserted that any rumors to the effect that he was busying himself as to Cabinet appointments were utterly without foundation.⁷⁵ But he entreated Buchanan to come to Washington no later than early February. “You will of course be immensely an-

⁶⁹ Stuart to Slidell, Kalamazoo, Sept. 18, 1856, forwarded in Slidell to Buchanan, New York, Sept. 29, 1856.

⁷⁰ Slidell to Buchanan, Oct. 4, 1856, enclosing a letter from Ward to Slidell, Louisville, Sept. 30, 1856.

⁷¹ Washington, Oct. 17, 1856.

⁷² New York, Oct. 31, 1856.

⁷³ Washington, Nov. 13, 1856.

⁷⁴ Washington, Dec. 27, 1856.

⁷⁵ Senate Chamber, Jan. 5, 1857.

nayed, but I feel that you cannot correctly feel the public pulse any where else.”⁷⁶

Despite assurances to the contrary, Slidell cannot really ignore Cabinet appointments. It is fortunate that Bright of Indiana, by returning to the Senate, relieves Buchanan of the embarrassment of breaking with Douglas on that issue. But on the other hand, there must be no appointment of a Douglas partizan, for Douglas is altogether too high and mighty, setting up to control not merely Illinois, but the whole Northwest. The old animosity, laid aside for the campaign only, was developing into a bitter feud. As Slidell interpreted it, Douglas behaved “like a Malay maddened”, who, in his frenzy against Bright, included Slidell for defending him in his absence. “I have had to be very cool to prevent an open rupture with him and was obliged at last to tell him that when I ceased to be his friend and became his enemy it would not be necessary for him to have recourse to third parties, but would discover it by my altered bearing.” Nevertheless the Northwest cannot be ignored in Buchanan’s Cabinet, and in view of Douglas and his rivals, General Cass is its only available statesman. Any objections to Cass can be overcome by the appointment of a capable assistant, and he is the undoubted man for the State Department. His appointment, moreover, to that post, will relieve Buchanan of an embarrassing alternative between Cobb and Walker. Walker has great talents, but his friends control him. They are dangerous men. Of the two, Cobb is the safer, but Buchanan knows them as well as Slidell. One place should go to an Old Line Whig. Here Benjamin of Louisiana would be Slidell’s nominee. One more appointment, and Slidell is done. The navy, if it is to escape utter ruin, requires, during the next four years, a “firm, prompt, severe man”. In conclusion, Slidell apologizes for intruding on the Cabinet question, but pleads that his suggestions have the rare merit of unselfishness.⁷⁷

Buchanan having decided to visit Washington, the question arose where to lodge the President-elect. The National Hotel was unsafe because of an epidemic; Brown’s, in the neighborhood, might have been contaminated; and Willard’s savored too much of abolitionism.⁷⁸ Buchanan decided for himself on the National, and Slidell could only warn him not to eat or sleep there.⁷⁹ More thrilling, even if not more important, was the still vexed question of the Cabinet. Cass had

⁷⁶ A second letter of Jan. 5, 1857.

⁷⁷ Washington, Feb. 14, 1857.

⁷⁸ Washington, Feb. 18, 1857.

⁷⁹ Washington, Feb. 23, 1857.

consented to serve, agreeing very handsomely to leave the naming of his assistant to Buchanan. The candidate under discussion for the attorney-generalship was, by very reliable accounts, unfit.⁸⁰ Some appointment, Slidell positively insisted, must go to Toucey.⁸¹ "Allow me to say that the regret and disappointment at the omission of Mr. Toucey's name would be greater than you can well imagine and that it will be most sensibly felt by Your faithful friend etc, John Slidell."⁸²

Notwithstanding his many claims to Buchanan's favor, Slidell was modest in his requests. The patronage of Louisiana was his for the asking, but outside the state he made few recommendations. Governor Pratt of Maryland, an Old Line Whig, seemed to him the logical appointee as naval officer at Baltimore.⁸³ In fact, recognition of Maryland Whigs constituted a conscious policy with Slidell as the best hope of winning their state to the true faith.⁸⁴ Those who already walked in the light were mainly gathered at White Sulphur Springs, Virginia, and the President was urged to mingle with these Southern admirers. On his failure to do so, however, Slidell put in writing what Buchanan would have gathered for himself, had he come, namely, the unanimity of Southern disapproval of Walker's course in Kansas during the summer of 1857, and of Southern confidence that Buchanan would at the first opportunity signify his own dissatisfaction with his emissary.⁸⁵

Buchanan and Slidell now being together in Washington, the necessity for written communication became slight, and their letters were few. But in August, 1858, on his arrival at Saratoga after a trip through the Northwest, Slidell addressed to the President a memorandum on conditions in the Douglas camp, the more interesting because of the widespread rumor that Slidell had circulated false stories in Chicago on purpose to discredit Douglas among his own constituents. Slidell makes no specific allusion to this charge, but recommends the removal at once of Douglas partizans from Federal office, and by requesting an appointment for Dr. Daniel Brainard as surgeon of the Marine Hospital, he strengthens a conviction, which denial will not silence, that it really was he who gave Brainard the mendacious account, promptly communicated by him to the press, of

⁸⁰ Senate Chamber, Feb. 19, 1857.

⁸¹ Telegram of Feb. 25, 1857.

⁸² Senate Chamber, Feb. 25, 1857.

⁸³ Mar. 11, 1857.

⁸⁴ White Sulphur Springs, Va., July 26, 1857.

⁸⁵ White Sulphur Springs, Va., Aug. 12, 1857.

the barbarous treatment of slaves on the Mississippi plantation administered by Douglas in the interest of his children.⁸⁶

Slidell himself, according to all the canons of precedent, was entitled to a great place in the Buchanan administration, and he was repeatedly offered the mission to Paris. He refused it on the ground of political necessity in Louisiana, and of his indisposition, with world affairs running smoothly, to accept "a mere mission of parade". But, unless Belmont would accept, he did feel impelled to recommend for the mission at Madrid his colleague Benjamin, whose appointment "will not only be satisfactory but gratifying to me in every way".⁸⁷

Slidell received no credit from Belmont for a solicitude which brought no results. Uncle and nephew soon parted company, with no small loss to the Buchanan organization. As for Slidell himself, a final and complete triumph over Soulé, by freeing him from anxiety in Louisiana, caused him to waver for a moment with regard to the French mission. But the Senate had a stronger claim, and there he remained, a loyal adherent of Buchanan, until the advent of secession terminated their ancient friendship. To the last it was a genuine personal affection, far deeper than a mere political alliance, and it is pleasant to know that it ended without bitterness or recrimination. The career of Buchanan had nearly run its course. For Slidell, Fate held in store strange experiences, at the very post which he refused from Buchanan only to accept from Jefferson Davis.

LOUIS MARTIN SEARS.

⁸⁶ Saratoga Springs, Aug. 8, 1858; see also James W. Sheahan, *Douglas*, pp. 439-441.

⁸⁷ Atlantic City, Aug. 22, 1858.